1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
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Chapter Nine

ADOLESCENCE, SEX AND MARRIAGE

ADOLESCENCE as a stage of development in the individual's life assumes but little importance, and is unmarked by a ceremony or any other means of social recognition. By the age of thirteen or fourteen the child's maturing of sex organs is referred to as 'bulough—maturation' (literally the stage when one reaches a peak). Adolescent boys are sometimes referred to as unmarried men (azab), or 'he whose sweat has become odorous', or 'he unto whom life has entered' (khashu al 'aish). For the parents, adolescent boys and girls do not present any specific problems, except for the fact that they are approaching the marriageable age.

In the villagers' view, adolescence and marriage are inextricably connected. It is not unusual for girls to get married by the age of twelve and thirteen, in spite of the law which stipulates that this may not be effected before the age of sixteen. This happens without official registration, and the reading of the 'Fatiha' between the two parties is sufficient to sanction and validate the marriage. Nowadays, boys usually marry after eighteen, on finishing the requirements and examination connected with military conscription, and it is one of the youths' misgivings against conscription that it delays their marriage, or at least provides a pretext for their parents for such a delay.

According to our way of approach, it is appropriate here to discuss the dominant norms that are emphasized in the genetic development of the individual at this stage. Most of these norms are not new but they loom larger in this stage, while other norms are still imperceptibly reinforced.

The first of these social norms is the emphasis on industry and responsibility of the maturing boys and girls. By the age of twelve or thirteen, boys and girls are now, with few exceptions, out of school and Kuttab. They could be entrusted to work either in the fields or at home without parental supervision, thus becoming a decided economic asset. Participating in adult work, with full responsibility, provides the adolescents on their part with a secure position in the family.[1]

[1]For examples of such responsible tasks, see Chapter I.

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witnessed, and which is typical as there is hardly any variation in the form it takes.

A is a boy who had recently been rejected for military conscription, on grounds of poor eyesight; he is known to be a good farmer, and a great help to his father. He was the eldest son in the family and felt that his father delayed his marriage unduly as 'fathers usually get their first sons married as early as possible'. After he was rejected for conscription, this boy could no longer bear any delay. As the custom is, he sent 'messengers' to persuade his father to get him married, as 'everybody was telling him that it was high time he got married'. On the other hand, his father was reluctant; he was in a quandary whether or not to proceed with this project; he was apprehensive that the lad might not be so devoted to his work after marriage, yet he felt the time was ripe for getting his son married, otherwise the boy might at any time 'bring disgrace' on the family. The lad's last appeal to the father was through a messenger who pointed out to the father that if the necessary steps for marriage were not instantly undertaken, the boy might think of leaving the village to find some work elsewhere. The father gave his consent, realizing that he would have to get his son married: 'There will be more "baraka" if it is done soon.'[1] The actual preparations would start in a month's time, when the harvest was ready.

Now a dilemma of choice faced the parents, as there were two girls of marriageable age in the family; one was the daughter of the boy's maternal uncle and the other of the paternal uncle. It was partly because of the mother's influence, and partly because of the boy's personal inclinations that his parents decided to marry him to his maternal cousin. This affronted the boy's paternal uncle, as his daughter, according to custom, had precedence over that of the maternal uncle. This man asked the lad's father for an 'Arab verdict' on the matter, and a formal gathering of relatives and some neighbours brought apparent reconciliation between the two brothers. They all agreed that 'although the boy was to get married into his mother's family the oil was still preserved in the house (zaitakum fi baitakum) and that he was not marrying a stranger'. Yet this slight was not forgotten and caused some tension and vituperation between some of the paternal and maternal relatives during the celebration of the ceremony.

The date of writing the marriage contract was then fixed. The father of the boy and his relatives and friends went to the house of the girl's father asking for her hand for their son in the usual phrase of 'talbeen al gurb' (literally 'we desire to get closer to you'). Neither the boy nor the girl was present during this gathering for writing the contract. Before the contract was written, the registrar (maazoon)[2] enunciated the following, which was

[1] This remark of the father indicated his social obligation for the marriage of his son; its counterpart is for the son to accept his father's arrangement for his marriage.

[2] The 'maazoon' is a learned man who keeps the official register of marriage and divorce. He is officially appointed after an examination in the Koran and the Sharia; it is an unpaid job.

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APPENDIX I

I had to leave and concentrate on memorizing the Koran. After one year I finished the Koran and recited it for my Sheikh Ahmad Mousa to his satisfaction.[1] Then my father offered a "Karama" in the Kuttab, consisting of a meal of wheat bread and meat eaten in the Kuttab by the boys and whoever is present (as one is not supposed to invite persons for a "karama") together with a gift of a white garment to the Sheikh. This was followed by a ceremony called "dorah" (classical "dawrah") going round the village, with sheikhs reciting odes (qasidas) in praise of the Prophet, beating the drum and the tambourine (tar), and followed by other local folk as well as the Kuttab children. On this occasion I wore white clothes; this is a holy practice like that of pilgrims returning from Mecca, who also don white clothes.[2] After this, I stayed in the Kuttab as an "Areef-prefect", repeating the Koran three times during the first year, at the end of which I sat for an examination (oral) set by one of the Ministry of Education inspectors, and on passing it I received a prize of £E2. I remained as an "areef" for three years, teaching the other children, learning the "Munawi mawled"—a rhyming prose as well as poems on the birth of the Prophet, the "matn-al-Ishmawi"—in the Islamic law (Fikh), "Matn al Jawhara" in monotheistic theology (Tawheed), which is in poem form. From the age of nine I had to help my father and older brother in farm work, but I was not pressed to work as my family wished me to devote myself to Koranic studies, and this is one of the things that distinguished me from many other boys in the village. But later in life, especially after my marriage, I had to work harder in the fields. My older brother was responsible for bringing fertilizer from the hill, while my father and myself helped in the other farm tasks such as irrigation, distribution of manure, and harvesting.

'In 1940 I went to Edfu, where the first stage of military conscription examinations takes place, and I was exempted on the basis of my knowing the Koran, after I had succeeded in the oral examination held for the purpose.[3]

'A year before I was called up for conscription, I left the Kuttab and devoted myself to farm work, and I got married when I was nineteen years old. I worked on my father's land until 1944, when I was appointed as a malaria supervisor to distribute tablets of quinine to the families during the malaria epidemic. For this purpose I had to make a survey of the population in the village to distribute the tablets, accordingly asking the

[1] A memory task of some magnitude: the Koranic text is a little longer than that of the New Testament.

[2] Wearing of white clothes on certain occasions is a symbol of ceremonial cleanliness and purity.

[3] Till 1948, sons of village omdas and sheikhs, those who paid £E20 exemption fee, those who knew the Koran by heart and University students could be exempted from military conscription. Since then a law has been passed decreeing that military conscription is universal, with very few exemptions, e.g. the single supporter of a family in the case of the father's death.

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159 in the Kuttab to improve his handwriting, as the maxim of the pious ancestors runs, 'good handwriting increases the clarity of truth'.

In the whole of Ali's life religion has meant much to him in terms of personal security. His need of recognition and for prestige is certainly satisfied by his knowledge of the Sacred Book and other sources of religious information. With his sensitive and shy nature he could not have integrated his personality except through this religious foundation. Moreover, Ali's subsistence resources have been secure so far as he is still dependent on his father and mother. At the end of every lunar month his older brother, Ahmad, carries Ali's family allowance of corn to the latter's house and no serious quarrel has occurred between him and his father or brother on these grounds. The harmony of relationship between Ali and his father's family could be also attributed to the fact that Ali still lives with his wife's people, who are about five hundred yards from his father's house, while his brother Ahmad lives in the father's household. Ali's father is about sixty-five years old, and is still a robust man, who works in the field, and is considered by his family as tight-fisted.

In contrast to his brother, Ali cares much more for his clothes and appearance in general, and this is one of the reasons his father sends him to deputize for him on various occasions. Moreover, while his brother has been a member of the 'Nakshabandi' mystic sect, Ali has never joined it, as his religious experience has been satisfied through his knowledge of the Koran and literacy, while his comparatively illiterate brother finds his satisfaction in the emotional ecstasy that is invoked by the repetitive rhythm of the mystic circle (zikr). Ali probably had not joined the mystic 593 order because his brother was already a member, and normally brothers are not found together in the Order. On asking Sheikh Hussein, who is the local head of the Order about this fact, I was told: 'Brothers do not come to the Order for the fear of the evil eye. Jacob advised his seven sons never to enter from the same door or follow each other; they should enter from different doors and always spread themselves.' Structurally, this is in harmony with the cultural values of hierarchy, order, and respect relations between brothers, as physical proximity between them in sitting or eating in public is not considered polite.

MAHMOUD

Mahmoud is illiterate, suspicious, and a proud man, so I had compiled his life history by asking him questions that would not arouse any scruples in his mind. He does not know when he was born, he remembers only that he just managed to escape the days of forced military conscription during the First World War, being two or three years younger than the eligible age.[1] This means that he is about fifty years old. My relation to

[1] These days are known in the villagers' language as 'assultah al askaria', when people from the village were conscripted to work on the military roads or as camp sentinels in Palestine during the First World War. 902

The Ministry of Public Works controls the irrigation of all cultivated land, settles the rotation of crops for each zone, watches over the embankments and canals, and, if the Nile threatens to break its banks, recruits the fellaheen necessary for their maintenance. 656

The Ministry of Agriculture regulates the acreage of cotton and rice, distributes and controls the selection of cotton seed, and levies the fellaheen needed to fight the boll worm or the locust.

The Ministry of Finance collects the land-tax through its *sarrafs* in each district, issues orders for seizures, buys cotton to maintain equilibrium in the home market, and by means of the *Crédit Agricole* attempts to systematise the finances of the fellah. 651 656 657

The Ministries of Education and Public Health oblige the fellah to improve his mind and his physique. 871

The Ministry of Justice, through the district courts, — and after agelong delays — condemns or acquits him. 692

The Ministry of National Defence arranges for his enlistment, or collects the exemption fine. 702

The Ministry of the Interior, acting in the common interest, supports all this network of regulations and so ensures order and public security. 656

The Government system in its present form is less than a century old. It was established by Mohammed Aly, and has changed little in its working since. He did not so much create the machinery which deals with the fellah as systematise it after the disastrous and arbitrary rule of the Turks and Mamelukes. The founder of the reigning House thus raised over the heads of the fellaheen a system of law and order which makes it possible for them, if not to progress, at least to live. 175 64

Let us examine this hierarchy from top to bottom, and consider the relations of each authority with the fellah.

First of all comes the King. The last two sovereigns (not to mention others) have sincerely desired the well-being of the fellah, and frequently given proof of this desire. Their Ministers, however, are often more occupied with politics than with government, and travel far more in Europe than in the 643 645

with no crumb. There are no public bakeries except in the towns, but every family bakes its own bread two or three times a week. In Upper Egypt the fellah's loaf is rather smaller, being about six inches across, though thicker. A labourer in the district of Armant told the author that he used to eat ten a day. 252 [265] 262

The ordinary food of the fellah, then, consists of bread, which he makes from maize of his own growing, and vegetables from the edge of his field, or others of poorer quality that his wife buys at the market, with the occasional addition of cheese, when not all the milk of the *gamoossa* has been sold. Briefly, he eats the cheapest products obtainable in the neighbourhood.

His diet is neither varied nor abundant. Does this mean that he is underfed? It is certainly the usual view. On the other hand, one authority (") finds that the foods—and even the water — which make up the fellah's diet contain a normal mineral content. The work, health and physical strength of the fellah seem to confirm this opinion, yet the increase of pellagra, and the very high proportion (perhaps 80%) of recruits for military service turned down, would seem to prove malnutrition. [164 167 702]

So the black soil, like the tongue in Aesop's proverb, is at once the best and the worst of things, giving the fellah both strength and sickness.

The mineral content of the food crops that it nourishes strengthens the men who eat them.

The germs and parasites which infect the sodden soil weaken the men who live on it and drink from it. [164]

From this interplay of natural forces, in spite of everything, a certain balance has been set up which has made the fellaheen a sturdy stock.

This is what justifies the view that the fellah's greatest affliction does not lie in lack of cleanliness, in disease, high mortality, or all the physical distress so far described, and to be further studied under the heading of housing. His real misery lies elsewhere. 164 515

am an Egyptian". Though far more truly an Egyptian than most political figures, he is unconscious of belonging to a nation. This explains why, in the nationalist movement which swept over Egypt after the end of the first Great War until she obtained independence, the world of the fellaheen took no part. Nation, liberty, politics, these are words and notions beyond their understanding. 181 619

During the first Great War the English recruited a native contingent, the Labour Corps, to defend Egypt from the Turkish attack on the Suez Canal. These "volunteers" had to be enlisted by force, with even more difficulty than for other forced labour. The same lack of patriotism explains the distaste of the fellaheen for military service. The 24,000 soldiers of the Egyptian Army are almost all recruited from among them. In practice the law of 1902 does not apply in all its rigour except to them. Government officials and their sons; only sons, eldest sons whose fathers are dead, helpless, or over sixty; students; ministers of religion; and invalids are all exempt. 702 464 619

A man liable to service is at the mercy of the lot between the ages of 19 and 27. When the lot falls on him he is enlisted for five years. To ensure his rejection he may put out one of his eyes, or cut off a couple of fingers. He will get into debt to buy himself off from military service, or register as a student. If he can, he will hide or escape. As many as 35% of the recruits shirk their service. 702 [164]

When there is no way out, and he cannot avoid leaving home to join the army, the family receives condolences and abandons itself to mourning as if for a bereavement. To leave the village is like going abroad. *Partir, c'est mourir.* "Enlistment in the army is the passport to town life. Everything in the countryside grieves and protests — ox, plough, *saqia*, *gamoossa* and all" (Guindi). [152]

The conscript will be sadly missed on the land. It is not surprising that the fellaheen prefer to pay twenty or even a hundred pounds to avoid service, even if they are to be burdened with debt for a very long time. 703 426

This is not to say that they make bad soldiers. The fellaheen are men that know how to handle a gun, and the victorious armies of Mohamed Aly and Ibrahim Pasha were composed of them. That is ancient history, but it 702

● 702 proves the capacities of the fellah. Here again the question of education comes in.

Nowadays the resistance to enlistment should be growing less. The men are better treated. When they leave the [554] army, in decent clothes, after five years of service under military discipline, they have lost their uncouthness and become *effendis*, gentlemen.

152 When a fellah is in barracks, or when he has taken 186 up work in a town so as to make a little money, he never forgets his native village, and homesickness shows on his stolid face. He tries at least to keep up contact with home and to retain some of its habits. Many a time the author [702 has written letters at the dictation of these illiterate peasants, 123] who hate being uprooted. It is always the same story: "Tell me how the crops are getting on. Give my best wishes to So-and-so, and to So-and-so".

621 If the vital interests of a village are in immediate 186 danger, each villager feels a strong sense of unity with the group; men, women, and children unite in a single force. Witness the dramatic affair of Abu Shâdy in 1936. As 579 part of a scheme to reorganise the drainage the Irrigation 186 Department had decided to cut off a canal that had watered the whole district for thirty years. The entire population rose against the labourers, against the police, even against the military, to prevent the diversion of the water. They held out against all these forces for several days. The women stood in the front line to urge on the men, the children provided a supply of missiles, and a regular strategy was improvised.

621 When a moneylender, a landowner, or a *nâzer* has carried 682 his exactions too far, and is killed with public approval, the 609 finest sleuth cannot discover the murderer, so close is the 579 conspiracy of silence. Should one village, or even a few people belonging to it, insult or injure the next, the inhabitants of the latter show a united front and avenge the insult with stones, clubs or guns (for many fellaheen possess these forbidden arms. Thanks, however, to the intervention of the police, these village wars are becoming less common, though private feuds are still as frequent, as fierce, and as sudden as ever (**).

476 Here is one of the contradictions of fellah life. In the 577 village everybody knows everybody else, and no-one would